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LUNCH WITH LYDIA

Mr. Miami Beach: Michael Aller leads the chorus of hurrahs

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Michael Aller, animated tourism director and chief of protocol for Miami Beach, is most definitely the sort of guy to stand on ceremony.

He's old school like that. He gets off on ritual. Which is why he's been wearing the same cologne, Kouros by Yves Saint Laurent, for more than 30 years. Why he's religious about his shirts all being Ralph Lauren. Why for more than 18 years, he has eaten lunch nearly every single day of every single work week during every single tourist season at Joe's Stone Crab. Well, not Mondays, Joe's is closed Mondays.

You're at his table on a Wednesday, and the place, as always, is packed with the power lunch crowd. Which means it's hard to get Aller to finish a thought. Nobody doesn't know Aller. Nobody doesn't stop to interrupt his grilled fish and steamed broccoli, which is what he eats, no butter, no seasoning, no nada, every time.

Here comes developer Scott Robins, then attorney Richard Krinzman, then Ita Moriarty, senior vice president of convention sales for the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau, then Jo Ann Bass, daughter of the man who founded the legendary Joe's in 1913.

Aller will get out of his seat each time, because after all, the city's chief of protocol (he's in charge of keys and proclamations, among other things) is not going to have shabby manners.

"This is not the most exclusive table at Joe's," Aller tells you when there's a lull. ``That would be in the inside dining room on the aisle. But I like this outer dining room more because from this table, I can see everybody come and go. If I miss them on the way in, I notice them on the way out."

But what about the idea that too much of a good thing is too much? Joe's might be a great place for lunch, but doesn't he ever crave, well, pizza? Or another cast of characters?

``This is where you see the developers, the judges, the doctors, the politicians. You know, everybody. And I like to greet. I'm a greeter. I'm also a networker. There's no point to sitting at your desk with a sandwich. In my job, it's about being out there."

And Aller, who has been tourism and convention director since 1991, when the city started its rise, takes his job seriously. Sure, he gets paid to be a cheerleader for the city, but he's more gung-ho about the cheerleading than even the job title demands.

"Waking up on Miami Beach, when that sun comes up, it's just an excitement that is unparalleled," he says with the zest of a game show host.

He uses that game show host voice a lot, in front of conventioners, banquet crowds, any group that checks into the Beach and requires a rousing welcome.

"He is very enthusiastic. You can sense the power of his joy. He's a great believer and a great ambassador for Miami Beach," says Mayor David Dermer.

Aller is probably a tad more low-key when he's dealing with the celebs and their handlers, who call constantly for help with game tickets and getting inside certain nightclubs and restaurants.

``I'm not going to name names. But yes, I always know who's here. For one thing, the police department will always let me know as a courtesy when somebody big is in town. I don't ever do anything with the information. We want these

people to come back. Yesterday there was all this paparazzi all over the Beach because Britney Spears was supposed to be here. They were in bathing suits and all kinds of disguises. Of course, they call me. I just say I don't know."

So, was Britney here?

"I don't know," Aller says in his trademark sing-song.

It makes sense that Aller is called Mr. Miami Beach. And Mr. Miami Beach is still bumming because his new Caddy -- of course, he has driven a string of Caddys -- has a curved front bumper that won't let him display his Mr. Miami Beach tag. It rides in the trunk, until maybe the next Caddy.

This is a guy madly in love with the "Sun and Fun Capital of the World." In fact he'll remind you that it's the "Sun and Fun Capital of the World" several times over lunch. If you go on the city's website and look for Aller's page, <http://www.miamibeachfl.gov/visitor/asp/whoisma.asp>, you'll hear for yourself just how electric Aller can be about the city.

He's been coming here since he was a kid. He was born and raised in Detroit, but his parents would summer here among the well-heeled Jewish set. His mom used to run into mobster Meyer Lansky walking to Wolfie's every morning.

"One day at a card game, somebody told her who he was. She didn't want to talk to him again. She was terrified. She thought he was just the nice man who she saw walking his little dog every morning," says Aller.

As a teen, he and his parents lived at the Fontainebleau hotel. Allers' dad sold the hotel a lot of stone and marble that the hotel couldn't pay for, Aller says. So he got a three-bedroom apartment in the hotel instead.

"We moved in in October of 1954 and the hotel opened in December of 1954. I was a precocious child. I spent a lot of time in the back of the house."

He hung out with Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Lena Horne, Nat King Cole, Jack Benny. Has endless stories about a whole different heyday. You'd think Aller would slip and say something about the "good old days."

But Aller, for all of his old school ways, is actually quite forward-thinking. At 67, he's gay and proud and as out as any city administrator has ever been. In fact, he reached out to gay people worldwide in the early 1990s to bring a giant wave of gay tourism to the Beach -- a trigger for the South Beach renaissance.

And so what that the gay community is not quite what it was? That the nightlife, both gay and straight, is not quite what it was, that the high-rise development has made it difficult to find even a sliver of ocean? That the Beach is not as edgy as it was? That parking is impossible, that everything is overpriced?

Aller won't get caught whining.

"Things evolve. A lot of people would say the Beach is over-developed now. They would say a lot of things. But, how many cities in the world are as beautiful as Miami Beach? Sun, surf and sand. That's what it's all about and that's what we'll always have. The complexion of a place has to change. But this is still one of the hottest places to be in the world."

As for the good old days:

"I'm a very tomorrow person," says Aller. "I don't pine for the past."